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U.S. will negotiate for hostages

By Mary Belcher
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The Reagan administration said yesterday it would negotiate with — but not make concessions to — terrorists, as a joint envoy of the archbishop of Canterbury and Pope John Paul II prepared to fly to Beirut to seek the release of four American hostages.

Terry Waite, special adviser to Archbishop Robert Runcie and a negotiator in hostage crises, decided to go after receiving an encouraging message from the Americans' captors, the Anglican Church said yesterday in a statement released in London.

A Shi'ite Moslem group, Islamic Jihad, has claimed responsibility for seizing the four Americans, who have been held captive between five and 10 months. To release the hostages, Islamic Jihad wants Kuwait to release 17 terrorists convicted of bombing the U.S. and French embassies in December 1983. Kuwait has refused.

There was no word on two other Americans missing in Beirut, diplomat William Buckley and American University librarian Peter Kilburn. Islamic Jihad said Oct. 4 that it had executed Mr. Buckley in retaliation for the Israeli bombing of Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters.

The Reagan administration statement yes-

terday that it would negotiate directly with terrorists provided the talks did not lead to concessions was being viewed as a softening of its position.

It came five days after four of the Americans held hostage in Beirut pleaded in a letter to President Reagan for negotiations for their release.

In the past, administration officials have stated repeatedly and unconditionally that the United States would not negotiate with terrorists.

"We do not negotiate concessions with terrorists, nor do we give in to ransom or threats of blackmail," White House spokesman Edward Djerejian said yesterday. "But we are prepared to talk with all parties — that includes governments, individuals and even the abductors of American hostages — in an effort to obtain their safe release."

Mr. Djerejian denied that he was stating a new U.S. policy on negotiations with terrorists. Instead, he said, there has been a "misunderstanding" of the administration's policy and "some confusion over the definition of the word 'negotiate.'"

But Jeremy Levin, a Cable News Network reporter held hostage for 11 months in Beirut, said yesterday the administration apparently is softening its position.